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A trail as French as Beaujolais

FROM OUR PARIS CORRESPONDENT



One of the first tasks to which President Mitterrand attended on coming to power in France in 1981 was to shake out the country's foreign intelligence service. It was then known by the initials Sdece, which the French pronounce rather as they do *steak*. Mr Mitterrand appointed a former head of Air France, Mr Pierre Marion, to carve up the secret service and this he did, removing dozens of agents judged to be too close to the far right. The service's name, which to much of the public evoked espionage and state-tolerated dirty tricks, was changed to the unpronounceable DGSE (general directorate for external security).

After wielding his knife for 18 months, Mr Marion made way for a more comfortable man, a quiet ex-sailor, Admiral Pierre Lacoste. All indeed appeared quiet on the intelligence front: until this month, when it began to look as if France's spies might once again have seriously embarrassed their government.

It was the president himself, in a set of letters from the Elysée last week, who first lent some official credibility to the idea that French secret agents planted explosives which sank the Greenpeace trawler *Rainbow Warrior* on July 10th in

the port of Auckland, killing a crew member. The environmentalists' flagship was in New Zealand to prepare for a voyage of protest against the French nuclear tests in the south Pacific that are expected to begin in October.

Mr Mitterrand's embarrassment is the more understandable in that France is under fire in the south Pacific. This is not only because of the nuclear tests it carries out at Mururoa atoll, near Tahiti, but also because of its hesitations about pursuing the decolonisation of its territories in the area. Most south Pacific countries, including Australia, the dominant local power, criticise France on both scores.

The president's suspicion that French agents may have been responsible for the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior* was implicit in an apologetic letter he sent to the New Zealand government last week, and in an exasperated find-the-culprit note he addressed at the same time to his own prime minister, Mr Laurent Fabius. On August 8th Mr Fabius announced that Mr Bernard Tricot, a distinguished former adviser of General de Gaulle's, would lead an independent inquiry into the whole affair. The choice of Mr Tricot was not without irony. It was de Gaulle who

switched French nuclear testing to the Pacific from the Sahara in 1966.

The Mitterrand letters, well publicised by the Elysée, achieved two aims: they took the heat out of the anti-French indignation in New Zealand and its neighbours; and they temporarily halted the rumour juggernaut, which might otherwise have lumbered closer to the president's office. Only temporarily, however. By this week one of the president's closest aides, Mr Jean-Louis Bianco, the chief of staff at the Elysée, was ensnared in the rumours. According to the weekly magazine VSD, which first broke the story about the Auckland affair, Mr Bianco had helped to supervise the attack on Greenpeace's boat. Calling the charge nonsense, a presidential spokesman said the magazine would be promptly sued.

This is not to say that the French authorities did not have it in for Greenpeace and its dogged activists. The French armed forces, which are responsible for the security of Mururoa, were worried that the *Rainbow Warrior's* warriors might attempt a landing on the atoll to thwart the planned nuclear tests (skirmishes between Greenpeace ships and the French navy have turned rough in the past). To prevent that, it seems, the navy planned to put marines in fast small boats off the beaches. So it was with something of an understatement that Mr David McTaggart, the president of Greenpeace, described feelings between the two sides when he arrived in Paris on August 12th for a meeting with Mr Mitterrand. "It's no secret to anyone", he said, "that the French military are unhappy with our actions."

But there is a biggish gap between irritation with ecologists and a lethal bomb attack on an unsuspecting crew. The tone of news reports in France on the increasingly mysterious affair suggests that most French people appreciate the difference, and want the culprits brought to justice. The Mitterrand government itself had little reason to be harsh, let alone murderous, towards Greenpeace. The Socialists were warm towards France's own ecologists before coming to power and the president is still sympathetic towards environmentalists (though not towards anti-nuclear protesters).

Hence the prevailing theory—that the attack was carried out by freebooters acting for the secret service well beyond any instructions from the defence minis-

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